

Religion, Ethnicity, and Community

Reiko Itoh  
Gettysburg College

Submitted to the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting  
November 15-19, 2000  
San Francisco, California

The Saturday Morning Informal Service at a Reform congregation in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, consists of some traditional Saturday morning prayers, Torah study, a rabbi's anecdotes, hearty singing with guitar accompaniment, and autobiographical accounts. In some ways, this small body of worshippers of about three dozen displays the characteristics of a therapeutic support group. Although hearing and helping were not original aims and still are not said to be the central goals, the service provides a variety of benefits and fulfills an array of individual needs, or each worshipper finds through participation rewards that address personal needs. The benefits of participation include the comforting sense of being among friends, but the most important benefit is perhaps a sense of place. In today's impersonal society, feeling of community and sense of fellowship is desperately needed. Also, by participating in a religious service and being supported by a rabbi, the participants are able to assert their Jewish identity in their own ways.

This paper is based on an ethnographic research carried out between 1995 and 1997. The researcher participated in this service every week and collected data through participant observation as well as informal interviews with the worshippers and the rabbi. Like other Jewish congregations across the country, the researched congregation is not only a religious institution but also functions as a community center in response to today's popular demands (Streiker and Tobin 1996:8). It offers recreational, educational, and social activities in addition to religious activities. Like other congregations across the country (Waxman 1983:88; Streiker and Tobin 1996:8), this congregation, therefore, shows a paradox; its membership is increasing but regular Sabbath attendance is not. About 800 families belong to this congregation, but little over 100 individuals are present

at each Friday night Sabbath service. What is more, only half of these participants are the regular worshippers, and the rest are families and guests of a bar/bat mitzvah child of the week. This indicates that affiliation with a congregation is not for religious observance but for affirming and expressing one's Jewish identity. As many scholars have pointed out in the past (e.g., S. Cohen 1988:194; Dashefsky and Shapiro 1974:122; Gans 1958:217; Gordis and Ben-Horin 1991:268; Liebman 1973:66-67), affiliation with a religious institution is the most popular way that American Jews affirm their Jewish identity today. This is because Jewish identity is often defined by religion in today's American society even though not all Jews are religious in the traditional way.

The researched congregation nurtures a sense of belonging with activities such as "*Oneg Shabbat*," an informal gathering with light refreshments after the Friday Sabbath service every week, which most of the participants at the service stay at least for a while. This is when people see friends and acquaintances, learn of their well-being and that of others, gossip, and reaffirm and expand their social networks. Within the context of the religious institution, and through the traditional Sabbath greetings, members of this congregation confirm their Jewish identity and enjoy positive feelings of being part of a Jewish community. While the congregation gains more and more social functions, its members also demand more traditional practice. This is probably resulted from a speculation that there are a great variety of religious expressions among the members of the Jewish community today and each member wants to determine the extent and depth of personal involvement. Having more options in religious activities allows each member to feel pleasurable in being Jewish in one's own way.

Much of the congregation's current attractiveness is due to the work of a young rabbi, who keenly senses these needs. While he agrees to start various study groups and religious programs upon request, he allows each member to have one's own way to be involved in religious practice and to have one's own belief or interpretation of God as well as Judaism. He supports those members who confess that they do believe in God. He supports intermarriage. He even defends for those members who come to the congregation only on the High Holidays or those who do not practice Judaism at all. The Saturday Morning Informal Service is the product of such novel belief and determination this rabbi has.

The Saturday Morning Informal Service, the topic of this paper, began about ten years ago at the request of four male members who grew up in Orthodox families and who were accustomed to attend Shabbat service held on Saturday mornings. There was a service but it was almost exclusively for the bar/bat mitzvah family and their guests and it was not held if there was no bar or bat mitzvah. Since its introduction, the informal service has undergone through some changes of style and format. Today, middle-aged female members are responsible for its management and about 30 people are present every week. The group includes adults of all ages, including one high school girl. About 2/3 are female, and some come as couples. It also includes three divorcees and several widows.

Although they use the same prayer book, the informal service is different from a formal Sabbath service in many ways. First, it is held at a lounge instead of a chapel, and participants sit in a circle. The atmosphere is informal and relaxed, and dress is casual. The rabbi is also dressed casually on those days when he does not have a bar/bat mitzvah

ceremony to officiate. The service typically does not start on time because people are busy in chatting with one another. Several regulars sometimes complain that not enough time is left to Torah study which follows the religious service, but chatting is one of the great delights participants experience at the Saturday Morning Informal Service. The rabbi usually has to shout to get attention or give up and start playing the guitar and singing the opening prayers (*Ma Tov* and *Mode Ani*).

The service is full of songs, which is one of the service's main attractions. Most of the songs are traditional prayers from the prayer book (such as *Sh'ma*, *V'shamru*, and *Ose Shalom*) but melodies are not always traditional. To the accompaniment of the rabbi's guitar, the attendants as well as the rabbi unabashedly throw themselves into their singing without concern for how well or poorly they carry a tune. When they sing, they simply feel good. Many first-time participants are overwhelmed by this atmosphere, but this way participants can feel togetherness or intimacy and fellowship.

Another distinct feature is that the weekly portion of the Torah is not read. Also, it is not the rabbi that leads the group in prayer. The leadership rotates among the attendants so that everyone takes part in. In this way participants can feel a sense of community and enjoy being part of the group. Since not all participants are fluent in reciting Hebrew prayers, all Hebrew prayers are read in chorus and in a slow pace so that those with no knowledge in Hebrew can keep silent until its English translation comes up and those with least ability can keep up with the rest. The important thing is that everyone contributes regardless of the facility with Hebrew.

The degree of religious commitment also varies. Many of the regulars seem unconcern with how seriously other attendants take the religious purpose of the service.

A few told me that they do not believe in God as well as pointing out who else do not. Many are open about their ignorance in Judaism or Jewish tradition. What matters is that they all identify themselves as Jews and want to be recognized as Jews. By revealing themselves and supported by the rabbi as well as other members of this group, they can confirm their Jewish identity. By telling his own ordeals with Orthodox rabbis in Pittsburgh Jewish community, the rabbi also encourages positive feelings about being Reform Jews or being Jewish in one's own way.

The warm feeling that members of the group feel toward each other is supported by a regular activity that implicitly underscores the virtues of trust and fellowship. Each attendant including the rabbi has to give her or his name and say something personal. The topic is totally impromptu and often no relation to Judaism; for example, favorite pie, zip code, or the worst snowstorm ever experienced. Whatever the topic is, everyone has to relate something personal. Although participants usually speak briefly, it takes only a few such sessions for newcomers to feel as if they are among friends. The group encourages its members to not feel alone in struggling with difficulties and to rely on each other to help ease pain. Feeling free to express powerful feelings, some members who have been burdened with grief or stress vent their troubles, and they and others often become emotional and cry. When one of the regulars lost her husband, she became deeply depressed. Along with the support of her children, relatives, and friends, she credits the Saturday Morning group with helping to revitalize her. And when his father-in-law passed away, the rabbi expressed appreciation for the group's comforting aid. Clearly, people also attend the informal service to receive and give emotional support.

The rabbi's anecdote toward the end is another attraction of this service. He tells mostly autobiographical stories, including tales of his childhood, adolescence, and college life, success and failure as a high school substitute teacher, misadventures in romance, and the hardships and joys of raising three children. Many of the stories are told funny, and even sad stories have some humor injected. The regulars say that he sometimes exaggerates or over-dramatizes but add that his stories are deeply touching and always carry some moral message or observations on the human condition.

The degree of commitment to attend regularly is far from total. Attendance decreases noticeably with the start of summer, and a noticeable difference in attendance can be observed in time of the rabbi's absence. Although members of the Saturday Morning Informal Service may prefer believing that the group carries on autonomously, the centrality of the rabbi for its cohesiveness and smooth functioning is clear. When members of the service learn that the rabbi cannot be present for a forthcoming Shabbat, attendance then drops. Many prefer that the subject of the rabbi's critical importance to the group not be raised for fear of generating discord. However, one day when the rabbi was out of town and one of the organizers of the service suggested that it could be conducted without the rabbi once in a while in order to relieve some of his work load. This led to a heated discussion that quickly focused on attendance in general. A few thought that in the rabbi's absence some people would not come because they cannot enjoy singing without the rabbi's guitar, or that without him the service is not well managed, or that without him there is no good story. One of those more religiously oriented criticized the fair-weather faithful "who seem to think that God would not be present without the rabbi." Toward the end of the deliberations, one elderly regular

scornfully whispered, “It’s just laziness,” and this became the accepted opinion. It is, after all, held from 8:30 till 10:30am on Saturday mornings, when working people want to sleep in. The proposal to ease the rabbi’s burden was dismissed by the rabbi himself when he returned and heard about the discussion. He said that he would not stop coming to this gathering because he himself enjoyed this group, which had comforted him when his father-in-laws had passed away.

This incident suggests that the importance of this service is far more than a means of spiritual fulfillment. Those who are seeking spiritual fulfillment could choose to observe Shabbat at the congregation on Friday evenings, but they choose to come to this service or both. Those who are accustomed to Saturday morning devotion are free to pray elsewhere. Actually, a few of the elderly male attendants who grew up in Orthodox families have dual membership at Orthodox congregations. But they choose to come to this service saying that they enjoy this service better.

One of the endearing features of the Saturday morning group is its hospitality and openness to all comers, regardless of who they are or what attracts them. Surely this in itself must hold satisfaction for participants. For example, the group includes non-Jews whose spouses are Jewish members of the congregation. One Christian, whose wife does not attend the informal service, is an active participant. On Saturday mornings he comes to this Jewish service and prays with his Jewish fellows but on Sundays he also goes to his church and worships there. What he finds rewarding from his involvement with the Saturday morning group is not known. Perhaps it is the warmth of fellowship and the sense of being in a tightly knit community, for the Saturday morning service is when expressing a generalized love for others is permissible, if not encouraged. For many it is



the place where strong emotions can be released, where one can rely on the comfort of sympathetic support. This Christian fellow often expresses that he really enjoys this service, more than his church service.

Several participants are primarily concerned with the religious aspects of the Saturday Morning Informal service. They sometimes express their anger at those participants who are chatting during the service, especially while praying. However, most of those in attendance appear to relish its social benefits. They truly enjoy the activities and friendly atmosphere. The group's relaxed, informal ambiance also encourages the participants with little knowledge in Judaic ritual and practice to raise questions they otherwise would hesitate to ask for fear of revealing an embarrassing ignorance. Thus, the group helps people who want to be Jewish when they are uncertain of how.

The older members of the group appear to take their Jewish identity for granted because in their time Jewish identity was something you ascribed to. Most of them were raised in Orthodox families and grew up in Jewish neighborhoods. For them, a religious institution is a place of worship and study, but it also is symbolic of community. At the informal service, such older Jews can develop close relationships with others, a sense of community.

Most of the middle-aged participants, on the other hand, are third-generation Americans who were raised in secular, assimilated homes, learned little about Judaism, and acquired little of an ethnic culture. Although some developed strong Jewish identities when they were young, others, especially women who did not study Hebrew and did not celebrate bat mitzvah, feel uneasy about their Jewishness. They experience a

sense of deprivation that becomes acute when they see their children preparing for and celebrating their bar and bat mitzvah. Beyond the usual reasons parents give for wanting their children to be bar/bat mitzvah, many of the mothers interviewed said that they wanted this for their children because they themselves lacked the experience. It seems that such women searched for a missing part of their identity that is satisfied through involvement with the Saturday Morning Informal Service. In addition to feelings of religious conviction and a desire to find lost roots or a place of belonging in the Jewish world, explanations for why some adult women choose to have a bat mitzvah for themselves include its signification of personal autonomy because it is a choice and American culture promotes freedom of choice.

Whether they deliberately set out to realize an idealized image of communal fellowship, or whether it simply happened, the devoted adherents of this informal service feel that they have with it a supportive community. As a place lending comfort through intimacy and caring, it bears a strong resemblance to therapeutic support groups, although healing and comforting ailing members is not its declared aim. Indeed, having developed as much by accident as design, lacking a charter or constitution, and having no mission statement or policies regarding its aims or purpose, the informal service group might be considered as an institution in an extended process of formation. It meets weekly, yet does not have a standard name, being referred to with terms like “Informal Service” or “Torah Study.” After a decade of existence, this lack of a standard name might suggest that the members prefer to keep the character of the group fluid. Undetermined characteristics of the group virtually invite continuous modification and change. This group meets in a lounge, not in a sanctuary or chapel; they are seated in a circle, not

pulpit and pews; they are dressed casually; and they habitually get started late with the service because they are busy in greeting, chatting and getting refreshment. This group is communal and the group's existence is based on friendship or love, not contract. The presence of Christian members also underscores the principle that the participation is based on friendship rather than doctrine.

The undeclared ideology of the group is that it does not exist for this or that instrumental purpose, but for whatever value people get from participating. Beyond the limits imposed by the group meeting in a Jewish house of worship, participants are free to seek and receive benefits that are tailored to their individual requirements. The group's hospitality, relaxed environment, and acceptance of each individual regardless of personal attributes allow those who seek for Jewish identity to feel at ease and to facilitate the process of ethnic and religious revitalization at one's own pace. This is a place where participants can enjoy a sense of community and gain other benefits as well.

### Bibliography

- Cohen, Steven M.  
1988     *American Assimilation or Jewish Revival?* Bloomington, IN: Indiana Univ. Press.
- Dashefsky, Arnold, and Howard Shapiro  
1974     *Ethnic Identification among American Jews.* Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.
- Gans, Herbert J.  
1958     "The Origin and Growth of a Jewish Community in the Suburbs: A Study of the Jews of Park Forest." Pp.205-48 in *The Jews*, ed. by Sklare. New York: Free Press.
- Gordis, David M., and Yoav Ben-Horin, eds.  
1991     *Jewish Identity in America.* LA: Univ. of Judaism.
- Liebman, Charles

1973     *The Ambivalent American Jews: Politics, Religion, and Family in American Jewish Life*. Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America.

Streicker, Joel, and Gary Tobin

1996     *An Assessment of Synagogue Inreach and Outreach: the Koret Synagogue Initiative Executive Summary*. Brandeis Univ.

Waxman, Chaim I.

1983     *America's Jews in Transition*. Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press.